

AMERICAN OVERSEAS
ON PAGE 16.

BOSTON GLOBE
8 March 1981

Just Bible translators? Colombians have doubts

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BOGOTA, Colombia — The house from which Chester A. Bitterman 3d was kidnaped is an ordinary-looking place in a middle-class, Bogota neighborhood. There is a patio with flowers alongside the two-story white stucco structure and a child's bike in the entryway. Outside, the neighbors come and go about their normal business.

But life inside the house is far from normal. Brenda Bitterman received word yesterday that the leftist guerrillas who kidnaped her husband, a missionary and Bible translator from Lancaster, Pa., had killed him.

Her ordeal — which she has not discussed with reporters — began Jan. 19 when six armed men and a woman pushed their way into the house and, failing to find the institute's Bogota director, Alvaro Wheeler, seized Bitterman, 28, who was working in Colombia for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a branch of the Texas-based Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Several days later, his captors sent a communique to newspapers stating that they were members of a guerrilla group called Movimiento de Abril 19 — the April 19 Movement, or M19 — and that they would kill Bitterman Feb. 19 unless the institute, which they claimed was a CIA front, left the country. Institute officials refused, but the guerrillas indicated that they would extend the deadline until last Thursday. Bitterman's body was found in a hijacked minibus in Bogota yesterday.

Although Bitterman's body was wrapped in the guerrilla's red and black flag, it is uncertain, as are many things about the case, that his kidnapers are members of M19, whom political observers here describe as an urban group of between 300 and 400 students, lawyers, doctors and intellectuals who turned to radical underground activities in 1970. They drew their name and cause from an election April 19, 1970, in which a populist candidate was defeated in what they — and many other Colombians — believe was rigged.

It was in 1972 that suspicions of CIA connections began to develop. Gen. Jose Joaquin Matallana, who was the inspector general of the Colombian army until he retired several years ago, said in an interview last week that he began to get word from landowners in the Lomolinda area that "strange people" were there, flying in and out day and night.

It was not long before speculation arose that a secret US rocket base was being constructed at Lomolinda, perhaps in the lake.

In 1974 Carlos Matallana, an architect and anthropologist, was picked to head a commission to investigate the institute. For several months, Colombian soldiers, accompanied by several anthropologists, surveyed the Colombian interior by airplane, made surprise visits to Lomolinda and to several of the tribes with whom the linguists were living.

Matallana said that, although scuba divers explored the lake at Lomolinda for three days, they found no rockets or other suspicious material. Overall, he said, the investigation produced no evidence that the institute was engaged in spying or smuggling.

The commission's report was nonetheless critical of the institute. Matallana's report said the people at Lomolinda at first insisted that they were linguists, although it was quite clear from the material they were producing that they were in Colombia to work as missionaries. The report also noted that very few of the workers at Lomolinda were Colombian.

The most serious objection the general raised about the institute was that virtually the only contact some of the more remote Indians had with outsiders was with Americans rather than Colombians, which he believed posed a security risk, particularly along Colombia's borders with Venezuela, Peru and Brazil.

Matallana's report recommended that the institute be asked to leave Colombia. Matallana said in the interview, however, that he found the institute staff well-meaning, and he said he admired their spirit of sacrifice.

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